

The Future of Braille in India: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

The present essay seeks to discuss the future of Braille in India, challenges and prospects. There are a number of overarching and complex issues that influence the teaching, learning, and use of Braille in India and consequently the future of Braille in India. Some of these issues pose a challenge and tend to eclipse the future of Braille in India, while others promise a bright future for Braille. The prospects of Braille in India can be as bright as it's past. The lovers of Braille can keep it alive in India for centuries to come.

KEYWORDS: Braille, Blind, India, Education, Talking books and Screen reader software.

Over the years Disability has been variously defined. In order to determine who need special assistance due to their disability, various Governments and organizations have formulated comprehensive definitions of disability. The official website of Disabled World defines disability as "A condition or function considered significantly impaired, relative to the usual standard of an individual or group. The term is used to refer to individual functioning, including physical impairment, sensory impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment, mental illness, and various types of chronic disease". The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995), passed by the parliament of India in 1995, defines disability as "'Disability' means- (I) Blindness; (ii) Low vision; (iii) Leprosy-cured; (iv) Hearing impairment; (v) Loco motor disability; (vi) Mental retardation; (vii) Mental illness". Similarly, it defines a person with disability as "a person suffering from not less than forty per cent of any disability as certified by a medical authority"

Blindness is one of the sensory disabilities. It is a condition of no visual perception owing to physiological or neurological factors. Total blindness is complete lack of light or form perception, and is clinically labeled as NLP: No Light Perception. Most dictionaries define the adjective blind as sightless or a person having no eyesight. It is generally assumed that blindness is total absence of vision in a person. But many blind persons have some residual vision that can be useful in getting around and other routine tasks of life. Today not only the sightless but a large number of persons with very restricted vision are included in the category of blind. This has increased manifold the number of persons included under the term blind. Thus blindness has become a major social problem which is neither intelligently understood nor efficiently handled.

Until invention of printing, only those with total absence of sight were considered blind. Those with some residual vision could adjust to their surroundings and could avoid the label of blind. With the advent of printing, many discovered that they could not read, and that their vision was much below the accepted standards of normal sight. Dr. Arnold Sorsby in his History of Ophthalmology writes "the desire to read was a potent factor in

making persons with impaired vision conscious of their loss.” (18). Thus the number of persons included in the category of blind increased rapidly and society began to find ways to improve their life and make them useful and productive members of society. Prior to this, blind were considered as pathetic and unfortunate, whose chief occupation was begging. They had to depend on pity and charity of others.

The means for educating the blind were lacking. However, there were some, who earned their living by application of their talents. Some had brilliant wits, some had musical talent, and still others were known for their scholarship. But most of the blind had no source of regular income and were rejected by their family and society. They were forced to lead a life of isolation and wandering. This scenario continued from ancient time through middle ages to the end of seventeenth century, when need to educate the sightless was gradually recognized, and there were scattered attempts to educate them. Attempts were made to find new methods of reading and writing for blind which culminated in the invention of Braille, a system of dots named after its inventor Louis Braille. Braille proved effective as a medium of reading and writing for the blind, and by the end of nineteenth century, was universally accepted as the medium of educating the blind.

In India, Schools for the blind had already been established during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and Braille had found acceptance as an appropriate medium for educating the blind. However, the complexities of the writing systems of Indian languages had somewhat hindered the development of Braille specific to the Indian environment.

Till 1980s Braille remained the most important literacy tool for the blind in India. However, with the advent of talking books, revolution in Information Technology, advancement of computers and development of screen reading software for the blind, Braille has become to some extent obsolete. Steady erosion in Braille usage is seen both among children and adults

The present essay seeks to discuss the future of Braille in India, challenges and prospects. Clearly there are a number of overarching and complex issues that influence the teaching, learning, and use of Braille in India and consequently the future of Braille in India. Some of these issues pose a challenge and tend to eclipse the future of Braille in India, while others promise a bright future for Braille.

Multiplicity of languages in Indian education system

Most of the Government aided schools and colleges impart education in regional languages making it difficult to achieve uniformity of textbooks. This in turn makes it difficult to print the textbooks for blind students. Shortage of study material in Braille forces blind students to turn to audio books and E-books. Very few blind students use Braille beyond primary school, which threatens the very existence of Braille in India. The multiplicity of languages in India has also made it difficult to adapt grade II Braille for regional languages adding to the difficulty of producing Braille books.

Challenges posed by technology

Developments in computer technology have made it easier to produce Braille, but they have also provided alternatives to Braille. Audio books and screen reading software

have substantially reduced the use of Braille. Proliferation of the personal computer and the rise of the Internet have further diminished the number of Braille users. Although refreshable Braille displays for the computer are available, their disproportionate cost is a hampering factor.

Not all blind, especially those losing vision late in life have very sensitive fingers to read Braille. The alternative for such blind persons is to use their sense of hearing for reading. Most of the Government and Non-Government organizations have shifted their focus from production of Braille books to the recording of books. A large variety of MP3 players and E-book readers available in the market have severely reduced the use of Braille.

Problems in teaching of Braille

The issues related to the teaching and learning of Braille are crucial in any consideration of the future of Braille in India. Scarcity of competent teachers of Braille is likely to demotivate the learners. Many teachers are unfamiliar with Unified English Braille (UEB), the Nemeth Uniform Braille System (NUBS) and musical notations in Braille. As a result most of the learners are unable to use Braille for Mathematics, science and music.

Apart from these major challenges, scarcity of funds for the production of Braille books, shortage of space to store Braille books and relatively short life of Braille books are likely to adversely affect the future of Braille in India.

Conclusion:

From the preceding discussion, it may appear that Braille is probably destined to go extinct in India. But there is no need to be disheartened for the lovers of Braille. The future of Braille in India is not as bleak as it appears to be. There is a positive side of the picture as well.

Notwithstanding the developments in technology, Braille remains an important literacy tool for the blind in India at primary level. Reading Braille is the only source of deriving the pleasure of direct reading for the blind. Dozens of periodicals are regularly published in Braille. Braille can play an important Role in making a blind person independent at home and at work place. It is the best medium available to label things useful in daily routine. Several hotels and restaurants in metro cities have made their menus available in Braille. Many sighted individuals have also learnt Braille and are transcribing books in Braille. Government is also trying to make important documents available in Braille. One can request the reply to an RTI in Braille.

Careful planning and proper implementation of the policies for encouraging the use of Braille will surely yield positive results. Several NGOs are actively trying to promote use of Braille. Many NGOs and individuals own Braille printers which can help in the proliferation of Braille among blind students. Diligent attention to the needs of all Braille readers can go a long way in promoting Braille among blind in India. The prospects of Braille in India can be as bright as it's past. The lovers of Braille can keep it alive in India for centuries to come.

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